

Article Title The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980
Article DOI 10.1080/09612025.2018.1509506
Journal Title Women's History Review

Corresponding Author

Claire H. Griffiths
University of Chester

Complete Author List

Claire H. Griffiths
University of Chester

Review of Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016.

In *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* Christina Firpo contributes a meticulously researched and valuable addition to the study of French rule in Indochina. Expanding on her doctoral thesis, this closely documented study recounts how the French authorities in Indochina responded to what they perceived as the problem of 'illegitimate' offspring - the 'Uprooted' of the title – born to Asian women from extra-marital relations with French men.

By focusing on a marginalised, less widely-researched section of colonial society, Firpo's research adds to our knowledge of the administration of the French colonial project in Indochina while speaking to broader debates on the historiography of empire. As Firpo notes in her introduction, 'Indochina functioned as a laboratory for the French state to test policies towards mixed-race children' (p.5), as such the study adds to a growing body of critical postcolonial scholarship on *la plus grande France*.

In *The Uprooted* Firpo presents her findings in a chronological sequence that operates both within and outside the standard framing of colonial and postcolonial studies of the French empire. The first five chapters are organised by time period starting in the 1890s, the decade in which French colonial society in Indochina, acting at this point through the Catholic Church, began removing children born to those Indochinese women whose French partners had failed to acknowledge or accept paternal responsibility. Stigmatised and marginalised from the outset within French colonial society, it was not until the First World War that the mixed-race population of Indochina began to be perceived in a more positive light by the colonial authorities. France saw in its 'half-French' subject population the opportunity to boost troop numbers in its theatres of war. Mixed-race males began to find themselves racially and socially recast as an asset, rather than as the threatening 'other'. External

threats to France created opportunities for slippage between racially and socially defined categories, and young mixed-race men could find themselves being drawn out of their liminal social worlds to engage in active military roles in the service of France. This potential among the 'non-French' male population of the colonies to swell the rank and file of the armed forces then translated in peace time into a recognition of the usefulness of a cadre of mixed-race administrators in providing a buffer and a conduit between the French colonial authorities and the colonised 'other'. The creation of this cadre would serve as the driving force behind the institutionalisation and education of mixed-race males in the post-war era.

Firpo's review of French colonial responses to its mixed-race population in Indochina takes us through to the 1950s, by which point bi-racial children made wards of the State were being managed, or 'protected' in the language of the authorities, by local mixed-race citizens loyal to *Indochine française*. At this point fatherless métis children were taken into care under the auspices of a national federation which by 1950 was known by the acronym FOEFI (Fédération des Œuvres de l'Enfance Française d'Indochine), having shed its previous name, Fondation Jules Brévié, in a bid to distance the programme from the high profile colonial chief and Vichy supporter after whom it had been named. The activities of the new federation multiplied in an era when mixed-race and French birth rates were almost equal, and the future of French rule was being challenged on a daily basis by the increasingly effective guerilla actions of the Independence fighters. Mixed-race boys and girls could now access an education that for girls might lead to junior office work in the French administration, and for young men might even result in prestigious jobs in the military, judiciary, and liberal professions. The policy supported the creation of a local male administrative class who could continue to wield influence after the departure of the French.

By extending her study twenty six years beyond the 1954 Geneva conference that brought a negotiated settlement to the war in French Indochina and independence to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, the author adds, in Chapter six, an astonishing coda to an already disturbing story of the forced removal and institutionalisation of over 10,000 children born to Indochinese women.

Firpo reveals how the federation that had managed the 'protection' of these children between 1946 and Independence in 1954, continued operating beyond formal decolonisation. 'From 1954 to 1975, FOEFI continued its colonial mission to search for métis children', Firpo notes, 'métis children of Frenchmen needed to be saved from Vietnam' (p. 132). This startling discovery contributes yet another useful reminder to scholars of colonial and postcolonial studies that the cultural history and political history of the postcolony are neither synonymous nor conterminous.

In this publication Firpo has crafted an engagingly written account that both fills gaps in our knowledge on Indochina and provides a starting point for further research on the gendering of the colony in French Indochina; the latter opens up opportunities for further insights into the way in which relations between gender, class, and race shaped colonial society across the French empire, and beyond.

CLAIRE H GRIFFITHS University of Chester

August 2018